

More College Students Seem to Be Majoring in Perfectionism

New York Times 2018

By Jane Adams

New data from American, Canadian and British college students [indicates that perfectionism](#), especially when influenced by social media, has increased by 33 percent since 1989.

As a psychologist, I'm not shocked. The [study, published last month in the Psychological Bulletin](#), reflects what my colleagues and I are hearing from our clients and discussing among ourselves: As college students are returning to school after their winter breaks, many parents are concerned about the state of their mental health. The parents worry about the pressure their kids are putting on themselves. Thinking that others in their social network expect a lot of them is even more important to young adults than the expectations of parents and professors.

"Millennials feel pressure to perfect themselves partly out of social media use that leads them to compare themselves to others," said Thomas Curran, the study's lead author and a lecturer in the Center for Motivation and Health Behavior Change at the University of Bath in England. He added that this theory hasn't been tested and would require further research.

"Meritocracy places a strong need for young people to strive, perform and achieve," he said. They have "increasingly unrealistic educational and professional expectations for themselves."

Parents in my practice say they're noticing how often their kids come away from Facebook and Instagram feeling depressed, ashamed and anxious, and how vulnerable they are to criticism and judgment, even from strangers, on their social media feeds.

Perfectionism is a personality trait or characteristic that is innate in many people. It is nurtured in some environments, notably in families where personal accomplishment, academic or otherwise, is rewarded: "Where self-esteem is earned, not just given out with a trophy for participation," said Steve Codling, a high school teacher in Seattle who believes in pushing his students as well as his college-age sons to excel and praising them when they do. But for other parents, it's often difficult to know when perfectionism in their kids is cause for concern: After all, the high standards they set for themselves probably got them into college.

The researchers looked at more than 41,000 students' responses on the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, which not only measures degrees of perfectionism but also distinguishes among its three aspects: self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed. And while self-prescribed perfectionism is associated with greater productivity, conscientiousness and career success, many parents are concerned when they see signs that it is affecting their child's mood and behavior.

"Sometimes it's paralyzing," Katherine Dieckmann, a filmmaker and professor at Columbia University, said of the perfectionist tendencies she sees in her 20-year-old daughter, a college sophomore. "I understand, because we were both born that way."

As an artist, Ms. Dieckmann herself has difficulty letting go of a project or task unless it's perfect. Like her daughter, she worries it to death, "believing it can be better, which so often is worse." She recognizes that her daughter's habit of procrastination is not from lack of motivation but more from a sense that "if she can't finish it perfectly, she'd rather not do it." That characteristic carries over into other areas of her life, Ms. Dieckmann said. "She's the same way about her hobbies, like photography."

Another parent, whose son is a student at an Ivy League college, said: "He's not striving to meet our standards, they're his own." The father, whom I cannot name because he is my patient, said: "I keep reminding him that perfect is the enemy of good, and he says, 'Yeah, but good's not enough to get into med school.'"

Hannah Miller, a Columbia graduate student, is candid about her perfectionism. "When it's not out of control, it's a good thing to have. When it overwhelms me, which is less often than it did when I was an undergraduate, I have to force myself to step back and make an accurate assessment of how important the task is and consider it thoughtfully rather than emotionally — like, how good does it have to be?"

When she finds herself procrastinating until a deadline, she repeats a maxim favored by a high school teacher: Do the best that you can in the time that you have.

Ms. Miller said that when she's stressed and anxious she turns to her close friends for comfort and support, and also to her mother, whose perfectionism, like her own, is mostly self-prescribed. Mother and daughter share a kind of presentational perfectionism, especially about public speaking. Ms. Miller said that her mother "gets over it the same way she tells me to: Prepare thoroughly and it will carry you through."

If you are a parent concerned about perfectionist tendencies in your child, the questions posed by the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, used in the study, may be informative. Among its 44 items, scaled from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree), are statements like these: *When I am working on something, I can't relax unless it's perfect; The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do; The better I do, the better I am expected to do.* The scale is not a clinical instrument, but the questions might be a good starting point for discussion.

It's hard to tell how much social media is affecting your child's self-image; many feel enormous pressure to be perfect off line, too. And it's difficult to know what, if anything, parents can do about it, beyond offering empathy, reassurance and emotional support.

If they've been here before, remind them that perfect wasn't the goal; good enough was, and it did the trick. ("Remember the way you felt before your SATs, and how well you did?") Make sure it's their perfectionism you're worried about, not yours. And stay in touch without hovering. If they seem really anxious for more than a week, suggest they seek counseling, or contact the school to ask whether the department of student life might sponsor a program about perfectionism.

And meanwhile, send care packages. It's fine if they're not perfect — they will still brighten your student's day.

Jane Adams is a social psychologist, writer and coach.